Existence and the Good : Metaphysical Necessity in Morals and Politics

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Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris appear to follow creedal Christian beliefs. So do the eleventh chapters of Alma and 3 Nephi. However, the LDS church distinguishes itself from creeds, reformed Christianity, and closed-canon traditions.

Claiming Christianity, denying creeds, and modifying canons create tension. Several issues complicate matters further. A third of LDS faithful are first generation (68). Many carry over theologies from their former affiliations. Also, the faithful of all traditions seem able to embrace denominational doctrines in a partial or selective way. Campbell et al. note that the LDS encourages private contemplation of policy in direct dialogue with God (44).

A collateral issue has to do with the LDS's conscious effort to be a world religion. Mormon theology, which advances claims of people and events during the axial age, rests on revelation from 1830 of the common era, without artifacts to evince these claims prior to 1830. Absent as well from LDS history are the rich, lengthy oral traditions preceding the written canon that give sacred texts precision from decades and centuries of revisions before a single word marks a scroll.

Axial-age sacred texts identify characters with their social and personal traits. A Homeric epic features a character named "Hated One," whom Poseidon hates. The Hated One's wife, Knitter, knits. The villains have names like Talkstoomuch and Againstknowledge. Gilgamesh features a creature made of mud named Mud. Likewise, the Old Testament has righteous kings named Righteousking, creatures of dirt named Dirt, and patriarchs who were rich and powerful named Father Brahman and Tsara. They named their son Chuck (Isaac) because they chuckled. The New Testament has a savior named Savior (Jesus), and the majority of given names reflect devotion to God or vocational trades. Platonic dialogues, as well, match personal traits to characters. There is a critic named Critic, a reasonable man named Ruledbyreason, a war leader named Warleader, a smart man named Head, and an orator named Elatedoration. By comparison, Book of Mormon names are less transparent. Its writing style is cumbersome and reads like attempted replication rather than axial-age accumulated knowledge gathered over decades and even centuries. None of these issues are permanent roadblocks between Mormonism and Christianity. The five or six Trinitarian moments in the Book of Mormon allow for readings consistent with Christianity if the LDS leadership decanonizes it.

Campbell et al. have written a fine book. Readers will experience a sense of gravitas as they read it. Its vocabulary seems defensive, using phrases such as "suspicion," "accuse," and "racially resentful." We non-LDS must emphasize that, whatever precisely the LDS faithful are, those who have not enjoyed their company in the weight room, on the racquetball court, in their congregations, in their homes, and in the halls of academia have lived a bit less richly.

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Gamwell, Franklin I. *Existence and the Good: Metaphysical Necessity in Morals and Politics.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011. x+209 pp. $75.00 (cloth).

The relations between religion and theology, on the one hand, and metaphysics and politics, on the other, remain controversial. Philosophers and political theorists continue to debate the legitimacy of the presence of religion in the public sphere, whereas postmodern theologians are busily developing "post-onto-theological" forms of religiosity, leaving behind old-fashioned ontological baggage, including theism as a metaphysical thesis. Franklin Gamwell's book contributes to both debates

and many others. It defends a strong claim, maintaining that theism plays a fundamental role not only in metaphysics but also as the foundation of morality and democratic politics. Writing in the process-theological tradition of A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, Gamwell develops a processual theism within what he calls "neoclassical" metaphysics. The volume is welcome especially because of its uncompromisingly unorthodox approach: few serious scholars today maintain, as Gamwell does, that "democracy itself can be vindicated only on theistic grounds" (2)—though Gamwell admits that this need not be explicitly recognized as a condition of democratic citizenship (14).

Gamwell's argument is too thick and complex to be properly summarized in a brief review. Its structure is, however, clear. The first chapter examines general metaphysics of existence, defending the neoclassical alternative—although Gamwell's discussion of different approaches to metaphysics is by no means as exhaustive as one might hope. The second chapter extends this approach to the metaphysics of subjectivity, attacking Martin Heidegger's views. The third chapter arrives at God and theistic metaphysics, while in the fourth chapter the author introduces the "metaphysics of human purpose" needed for ethics based on the notion of the "comprehensive good." The two final chapters explore the metaphysics of democracy, attempting to demonstrate that democracy and justice need backing from the kind of metaphysics developed in the earlier chapters.

Gamwell's conception of metaphysics is sharply critical of Kantian and post-Kantian conceptions. For Gamwell, metaphysics amounts to a "critical study of what must be the case because the complete absence of existence is impossible," that is, a "critical study of what must be the case because something must exist" (4; see also 30–31). Thus, from the denial of the possibility of there being mere nothingness, a whole metaphysical system is derived, culminating with moral teleology and democratic justice. Metaphysical *necessity* is a key concept here. Metaphysics examines the necessities that need to be postulated on the grounds that it is impossible that there is nothing. Given the centrality of this idea in Gamwell's project, I find it odd that no substantial discussion of contemporary analytic metaphysics of necessity and possibility is included: no references to leading modal metaphysicians such as D. M. Armstrong, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, and E. J. Lowe are provided. (Nor, for that matter, is theological literature covered in any depth.)

Formulating his metaphysical arguments in terms of necessary conditions for possibilities we must take for granted, Gamwell also labels his project "transcendental metaphysics" (7). This I find problematic; it is, rather, the Kantian examination of the metaphysical features of humanly constructed reality that deserves the label "transcendental." Gamwell's system integrates transcendental argumentation with a relatively strong form of metaphysical realism; such an integration is, inevitably, full of tensions. Moreover, the metaphysical foundation of the system seems to be too good to be true: if God's existence, divine and human purposes, the comprehensive good, and ultimately ethics and politics (etc.) could really be soundly derived from the meaninglessness and (thus) impossibility of "nothing exists," then one might suppose that such an argument would already have been discovered by metaphysicians. In Gamwell's process-metaphysical and -theological terms, "the impossibility of sheer nothing entails the necessity of the world (the metaphysical society of fragmentary actualities) and the necessity of God (the metaphysical society of all-inclusive actualities)" (73).

Gamwell's metaphysics is "transcendental" because metaphysical statements "articulate what must be the case because 'something exists' is necessarily true" (59). However, usually transcendental inquiries investigate necessary conditions for the possibility of something we find actual but contingent, such as cognitive experience

(e.g., in Immanuel Kant) or linguistic meaning (e.g., arguably, in Ludwig Wittgenstein). Astonishingly, then, Gamwell calls "transcendental" a system of metaphysics that the key classic of transcendental philosophy, Kant, would not have accepted as properly transcendental. Hence, Gamwell's concept of transcendentality itself is pre-Kantian (or even medieval) rather than post-Kantian. (See also, however, his discussion of the principle of communicative respect as "transcendental"; 123ff.)

Gamwell's concluding formulation of neoclassical theism is also theologically interesting: "As the metaphysical individual, God is literally the one 'in whom we live and move and have our being'; our relation to God defines our very existence in the world and thus our presence as creatures who act to make a difference" (92). Therefore, it is unsurprising that God plays a major role in ethics and politics. Religious activity, Gamwell explains, is needed to represent our communion with the divinity empowering us to strive for our metaphysical purpose (126). God alone "gives ultimate worth to human purpose" and authorizes democracy and justice (177).

Religion, in Gamwell's definition, is "a cultural formation or set of concepts and symbols and associated communal practices in terms of which or through which its adherents explicitly affirm as decisive an understanding of their relation to existence as such" (128; cf. 159). While Gamwell carefully and insightfully argues against proposals to justify democracy without any recourse to metaphysics, and while we may agree with him that the political importance of religions lies in their convictions about "the ultimate terms of political assessment" (159) and attempts to represent "what is presupposed in all human practice" (163), I find it hard to follow him to the conclusion that democracy and justice are based on theism. Showing where he goes wrong would require a demonstration of a flaw in his overall complicated argument. Being unable to engage in such an exercise here, I simply rest my case on the observation that the methodology of metaphysics allegedly deriving substantial principles concerning mind-independent reality from conceptual assumptions (such as the claimed impossibility of sheer nothingness) was already heavily, and plausibly, attacked by Kant and his followers.

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Grasso, Christopher. *Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ix+649 pp. $34.95 (cloth).

In this erudite and meticulously researched book, Christopher Grasso sheds light on the role of freethinking, deism, and irreligion in American culture between independence and the Civil War. Challenging the notion that the United States was "the Western world's exception to the secularization and disenchantment that was commonly thought to define modernity" (5), Grasso shows how the dialogue between religious faith and skepticism shaped peoples' beliefs and practices in the early republic.

Divided into four parts and thirteen chapters, the book begins by exploring late eighteenth-century debates between deists and Christians about the place of organized religion in civil and political life. Christians deployed notions such as "common sense" and "self-evident truths" to defend their faith from the skeptical scrutiny of the deists (26–27). Many argued for the inseparability of Christian morality and public virtue: they "likened 'the propagation of deism' to treason" (128), showing "'infidel philosophy' to be a dangerous social and political threat" (47). The deists, in turn, appealed to the inherent rationality and liberty of human beings, calling for a society based on reasonable self-interest. Describing rival attempts to improve education and health care along with calls for women's emancipation and workers' rights,